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ABSTRACT

To determine effective strategies for connecting Hispanic parents and their children's early childhood programs, educators need to develop a greater understanding of the features of the Hispanic culture that influence parents' childrearing practices and orientation toward formal education. Educators should be aware of Hispanics' diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, country of origin, and the nature and timing of their immigration. Except for Cuban-Americans, Hispanics can be characterized as having high rates of poverty and low levels of educational achievement. They are also an educationally vulnerable minority group, starting kindergarten somewhat behind their peers. Educators should note some differences in the way Hispanic and other American children are socialized. First, Hispanic culture tends to emphasize obedience and to value respect for adult authority. A directive style of communication between parent and child is most common, with little collaborative conversation. Second, throughout Hispanic culture there is a belief in the absolute authority of the school and teachers. Third, Hispanics, as a whole, have strong family ties and a collective orientation that supports community life. Addressing these differences, projects in early childhood programs and in schools that have successfully involved Hispanic parents recommend the following strategies: (1) a personal touch that includes personal meetings and home visits; (2) non-judgmental communication; (3) perseverance on the part of teachers in maintaining parents' involvement; (4) bilingual support; (5) administrative support; (6) staff development activities focused on Hispanic culture; and (7) community outreach efforts in which schools and programs serve as resource and referral agencies to support families. Contains 10 references. (BC)

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Hispanic Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Programs

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Increasing parents' involvement in their children's education is currently viewed as a cornerstone of most school reform efforts. This belief is expressed in President Clinton's plea during his 1994 State of the Union Message:

> "Parents who know their children's teachers and turn off the television and help with the homework and teach their kids right from wrong—those kind of parents can make all the difference."

There is remarkable consensus among educators, parents, and the general public that children will learn more and schools will improve if we can get parents to do a better job of supporting their children's schooling. Epstein (1992, p.1141) has summarized research on parent involvement as suggesting "that students at all grade levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations, and other positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved."

However, evidence exists that merely increasing the *amount* of school involvement will not necessarily lead to such positive outcomes, especially for Hispanic families (Bauch, 1992). Hispanic parents have consistently demonstrated low rates of school involvement; when their involvement has increased, this increase has not necessarily led to parents' more positive perceptions of schools (Bauch, 1992; Costas, 1991). If Hispanic parents feel coerced and not listened to, they do not necessarily benefit from increased contact with the school. To determine effective strategies for connecting Hispanic parents and their children's early childhood programs, educators need to develop a greater understanding of the features of the Hispanic culture that influence parents' childrearing and socialization practices, communication styles, and orientation toward formal education.

Hispanic Profile

Although they are united by a common language, Hispanics in the U.S. are not a homogeneous group. They represent great diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, race, age, country of origin, and the nature and timing of their immigration (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Differences among Hispanic subgroups in communication styles and socialization practices are often greater than the overall differences between Hispanics and non-Hispanics (Haycock & Duany, 1991). Although Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S., relatively little is known about how the Hispanic culture might interact with the typical American school culture to produce positive results for children.

Hispanics, except for Cuban-Americans, can be characterized as having high rates of poverty and low levels of educational achievement (Valdivieso & Nicclau, 1992). They are also one of the most educationally vulnerable minority groups in the U.S. They start kindergarten somewhat behind their peers; 44%, by age 13, are at least one year below expected grade level; and more than 40% drop out before completing high school (Liontos, 1992; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Although the academic achievement levels and dropout rates for other racial and ethnic groups have improved in the past decade, Hispanic school performance remains consistently poor (Liontos, 1992). In order to correct this situation, educators must understand cultural factors that may be acting as barriers to Hispanic children's educational success and then devise approaches to help early childhood programs reach out to Hispanic parents and form partnerships with the home.

Cultural Characteristics

There are some differences in the way Hispanic and other American children are socialized. Hispanic culture tends to emphasize obedience and to value respect for adult authority. A directive style of communication between parent and child is most common, with little collaborative conversation, elaborated speech models, or early literacy experiences (Espinosa & Lesar, 1994; Liontos, 1992). Consequently the language development of Hispanic children is frequently behind that of their American middle class peers when they enter kindergarten, and may appear especially so if they have been assessed with formal language measures.

Throughout Hispanic culture there is a widespread belief in the absolute authority of the school and teachers. In many Latin American countries it is considered rude for a parent to intrude into the life of the school. Parents believe that it is the school's job to educate and the parent's job to nurture and that the two jobs do not mix. A child who is well educated is one who has learned moral and ethical behavior.

Hispanics, as a whole, have strong family ties, believe in family loyalty, and have a collective orientation that supports community life; and have been found to be field dependent with a sensitivity to nonverbal indicators of feeling (Zuniga, 1992). Culturally this is represented by an emphasis on warm, personalized styles of interaction, a relaxed sense of time, and a need for an informal atmosphere for communication. Given these preferences, a culture clash may result when Hispanic students and parents are confronted with the typical task-oriented style of most American teachers.

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While an understanding of the general cultural characteristics of Hispanics is helpful, it is important to not overgeneralize. Each family and child is unique, and care should be taken to not assume values and beliefs just because a family speaks Spanish and is from Latin America. It is important that teachers spend the time to discover the particular values, beliefs, and practices of the families in their community.

Teachers must also examine their own attitudes about working with a minority group that speaks a different language from their own and may not share the values of their own culture. To establish genuine partnerships with parents, genuine relationships with parents built on a foundation of mutual trust and openness must first be developed.

Strategies That Work

Most, if not all, Hispanic parents want their children to succeed in school. Some education professionals have called Hispanic parents a great "untapped resource" (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990, p.9). Their concern for their children, commitment to family, respect for education, and desire for a better life have rarely been capitalized on by the educational establishment. Projects in early childhood programs and in schools that have successfully involved Hispanic parents recommend the following strategies:

1. Personal Touch. It is crucial to use face-to-face communication in the Hispanic parents' primary language when first making contact. Written flyers or articles sent home have proven to be ineffective even when written in Spanish. It may also take several personal meetings before the parents gain sufficient trust to actively participate. Home visits are a particularly good way to begin to develop rapport.

2. Non-Judgmental Communication. In order to gain the trust and confidence of Hispanic parents, teachers must avoid making them feel they are to blame or are doing something wrong. Parents need to be supported for their strengths, not judged for perceived failings.

3. Perseverance in Maintaining Involvement. To keep Hispanic parents actively engaged, activities planned by the early childhood program must respond to a real need or concern of the parents. Teachers should have a good idea about what parents will get out of each meeting and how the meeting will help them in their role as parents.

4. Bilingual Support. All communication with Hispanic parents, written and oral, must be provided in Spanish and English. Many programs report that having bicultural and bilingual staff helps promote trust (Espinosa & Lesar, 1994).

5. Strong Leadership and Administrative Support. Flexible policies, a welcoming environment, and a collegial atmosphere all require administrative leadership and support. As with other educational projects or practices that require innovation and adaptation, the efforts of teachers alone cannot bring success to parent involvement projects. Principals must also be committed to project goals.

6. Staff Development Focused on Hispanic Culture. All staff must understand the key features of Hispanic culture and its impact on their students' behavior and learning styles. It is the educator's obligation to learn as much about the children and their culture and background as possible.

7. Community Outreach. Many Hispanic families could benefit from family literacy programs, vocational training, ESL programs, improved medical and dental services, and other community-based social services. A school or early childhood program can serve as a resource and referral agency to support the overall strength and stability of the families.

Conclusion

It is critical that early childhood programs demonstrate successful approaches to working with Hispanic families. By forging closer communication and bridging the cultural gap between home and school, early childhood educators can establish a basis for future school success. The current educational status of Hispanic children creates a sense of urgency about these issues.

For More Information

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